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Not Censorship But Selection

By Lester Asheim

THERE IS AN AMUSING WORD GAME with which many of you are familiar in which the object is to trace an action, a point of view, or a characteristic through the gamut of its connotations from the most to the least acceptable. The point of the game is that the most admirable aspect of the characteristic is always assigned by the speaker to himself, whereas the least attractive aspect is taken to be that which characterizes somebody else. Thus, "I know the value of a dollar; he is miserly." To many, the title of my paper would seem to reflect a similar tendency. *I* select but *he* censors.

When librarians discuss the matter among themselves, they are quite satisfied with the distinction between censorship and selection, and are in smug agreement that the librarian practices the latter, not the former. Non-librarians are less disposed to be so generous in their interpretation of the librarian's action. Thus in its article on censorship, the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* points out that "Libraries and booksellers have sometimes undertaken to censor books, declaring that they would not circulate books 'personally scandalous, libelous, immoral, or otherwise disagreeable,'" and Morris Ernst is even more outspoken:

The subterranean censorship may appear in the public library as well. . . . Do public librarians attempt to supervise the tastefulness of their readers by making it a fixed policy not to buy "objectionable" books? It is a simple expedient and has often been applied. The public librarian often has the plausible excuse that as the funds of a library are limited, he must pick and choose, and naturally the more "wholesome" books are to be preferred. He insists that he is exercising not censorship but the prerogative of free selection. Nevertheless, the character of this choice is often suspicious. (Morris L. Ernst and William Seagle, *To the Pure . . . A Study of Obscenity and the Censor*.¹)

Clearly, in these two quotations, any deliberate bar against free access to a book is designated "censorship," and it does not matter that the control is enforced by the librarian rather than by a postal authority, or a pressure group. Does the librarian really have any grounds for claiming that there is a difference?

Our concern here, of course, is not with cases where the librarian is merely carrying out an obligation placed upon him by law. Where the decision is not his to make, we can hardly hold him responsible for that decision. Thus, the library which does not stock a **hook** which may not be passed through customs or which is punishable by law as pornographic, will not be considered here. The real question of censorship versus selection arises when the librarian, exercising his own judgment, decides against a book which has every legal right to representation on his shelves. In other words, we should not have been concerned with the librarian who refused to buy *Ulysses* for his library before 1933—but we do have an interest in his refusal after the courts cleared it for general circulation in the United States.

What Is the Difference?

Yet, in its practical results, what is the essential difference to the patron who cannot get *Ulysses* from the library because the customs office refused it admission to the United States, because the librarian decided not to buy it, or because a local pressure group forced its removal from the shelves? In each case, he is deprived of access to a particular piece of communication through the action of someone else. Can we seriously make a case for our claim that in the first and third instances censorship was operative, but in the second instance, the librarian was exercising selection, not censorship?

The first instance illustrates censorship in its purest and simplest form: a work is banned from the entire country by legal action. If this is the characteristic of censorship, then the librarian is not a censor, for he does not go to law to enforce his judgment—and he does not because he has no intention of denying access to the book through any channel but that of his own agency. He does not say (as the law says), "This book shall not be circulated." He says only, "I will not circulate it."

The third instance illustrates censorship in its impurest and most complex form: a work is banned from an entire community by the

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¹ New York: Viking, 1928, p. 161.

extra-legal pressure of a small segment of the community. Again, it is the scope of the ban which distinguishes the second and third instances: the librarian controls only the content of his own institution; the pressure group attempts to control the content of all institutions, whether under their jurisdiction or not.

Limited Span of Control

But the allegedly limited span of the librarian's control is not a sufficient virtue to absolve him of any suspicion of censorship action. The local pressure group, after all, is also limited in its effectiveness; a ban in Boston does not affect the rest of the nation or even the state of Massachusetts. But it is considered to be censorship nevertheless, and if an effect on a single community is sufficiently wide to qualify rejection as censorship, we must recognize that in many communities the library is the only real agency for the circulation of book materials and that the ban in the library is, in effect, a ban which operates on the community as a whole. If we accept the range of its effectiveness in its community as the key to censorship action, we are forced into the position of saying that when the small town library fails to purchase an expensive book of limited scholarly interest, that is censorship, but when a large city library rejects a book of minority political opinion, that is not. Most of us would suspect, I think, that just the reverse is the truth.

But why? If the results of the action are the same, wherein does the difference lie? Can we actually claim—seriously—that the reasons, the motives, the causes are different, and that this difference is sufficient to justify the distinction between the rejection which we will call selection and the rejection which we will call censorship? I think we can—and I think that even the patron who is deprived of the book is affected differently when the motive is selection rather than censorship. To use a far-fetched analogy, a man who has his leg amputated in order to save his life is in a different situation from a man who has his leg amputated by a sadistic doctor who performs the operation through psychotic compulsion rather than scientific requirement. The end result is the loss of a leg in each case—but these are different kinds of things nevertheless—and the “victim” of the loss knows the difference.

It may be objected that even though this be so, there is still the problem of whether

the doctor knows the difference and if he does, whether he can be relied upon to admit it. Will he not rationalize his action in terms of the acceptable reasons? Will not the doctor insist that the amputation was necessary to keep the body healthy even as the librarian now claims that the rejection is necessary to keep the collection strong?

The answer to these questions is well known; each of us is familiar with man's ability to paint himself in the most flattering colors. But that good motives are sometimes claimed by those who have no right to them does not mean that therefore no good motives are possible. We have said that they are possible and that they are the key to the distinction between selection and censorship. We have said also that we cannot rely solely on stated claims to guide us to that key. Our problem is complicated by the fact that we are forced to check what a man says against his actions.

Well, the action with which we must deal is the rejection which occurs in the library. Librarians do not deny that rejection occurs, but they claim that the ideal of absolute equality for all books is unattainable even supposing it were desirable. To demand that all books be equally accessible is to demand that all books occupy the same place on the same shelf—a physical impossibility. And as soon as we defer to the laws of physics and place each book in a different place, we shall start having some books less accessible than others and shall be—in a sense—discriminating against the least accessible.

Physical Problems

But let us suppose that we recognize that equal accessibility is unattainable, why should not all books be available at least? Again we run into physical impossibility—no library in the world is large enough to house even one copy of every printed publication. Nor is the difficulty merely physical, as any practicing librarian knows from bitter experience. Long before we are allowed to test the physical limits of complete availability we are brought up short by financial limits (implicit already in the physical in that among the many things we cannot afford to buy is the needed spare). So complete representation of every title ever published is an idle dream. Consequently some titles will not be purchased, and that is rejection.

Many librarians would say that, in such a situation, that is also selection, and they would like to stop the discussion at that

point. Since we can't have everything, since we can't afford all of the things that might be purchased, it is necessary to select, the reasons are financial and physical, and that—they would like you to believe—is that. It would be dishonest to pretend, however, that financial considerations are the only ones which shape the judgment to purchase or reject. The librarian also feels an obligation to select in terms of standards—and there are some books that he would not buy even if money were no problem. Unfortunately, some of our standards are sufficiently subjective, sufficiently vague, and sufficiently imprecise to serve the uses of the censors as well as of the selectors. Merely to cite the standards does little to prove our claim that ours is not a censoring function.

Intent of the Author

One of our standards, for example, is the presumed intent of the author and the sincerity of his purpose. This is a valid standard certainly, but only a subjective judgment can be made concerning it. There is a very real danger, almost impossible to combat, that a point of view with which the reader is in agreement will seem to be more sincerely held than one with which he disagrees. When a book attacks a basic belief or a way of life to which we are emotionally attached, its purpose will seem to us to be vicious rather than constructive; dangerous rather than valuable; deserving of suppression rather than of widespread dissemination. Some of the most notorious instances of censorship have been based upon the assumption that the writer's purpose was pornographic or treasonable—and I think we must concede that the censors in most of these cases really believed that ideas which offended them so deeply must of necessity have an ignoble motivation.

Literary excellence is a second criterion to which most librarians would subscribe, but again the judgments are essentially subjective, although more precise indicators can be established to test literary quality. A reader who does not like a book usually considers it to be badly written; conversely a book whose ideas please him will seem to be one which is written well. We have plenty of evidence that the readers of books which have little or no critical acceptance—the rental romances and the moral tracts—consider them to be very well written indeed. Try to convince an Edgar Guest devotee that his poetry is poor, or that the poetry of Dylan Thomas is better;

try to make a case, to a constant reader of the Lutz books, that there is stronger moral fibre in a book like *Catcher in the Rye*.

There is an added complication here—and that is the high incidence of books which are not written well but which do have literary standing. The Dreisers, the Farrells, the James Joneses fall down on some of the simplest basic rules for good writing, yet most librarians accept them as deserving additions to a library collection. To many of our patrons it seems that the library's choice of works is based, not upon literary excellence but upon the amount of sordidness, iconoclasm, and obscenity that can be crammed within the covers of a single book. Why is it, they ask, that the librarian always finds a "dirty" book to be better written than a "wholesome" one?

Still another criterion for selection is the presumed effect upon the reader, and here again we have only our guesses, based upon our own individual subjective reaction. And here again, we have a standard which is the basis for most of what we should all be agreed may properly be called censorship. What other reason is there for censorship than the assumption that the condemned book will have a harmful effect upon its readers—or at least on some of them? That we know nothing about reading effects really, that no solid studies exist which prove that books have a bad effect upon readers is of very little use in a battle against censorship. If we have almost no evidence that books are harmful, we have less that they are not, and it is quite understandable that those who favor censorship should advocate wariness against materials which may be harmful. If you don't know whether a bottle contains poison or not—I paraphrase a standard argument—it is better *not* to drink from it.

Time and Custom

Lastly, librarians agree with the courts that the time, and the custom of the community, are important elements to be considered in judging the value and effectiveness of a book. Such a standard, however, is a strong support for a censorship which would stultify the development of a literature and the propagation of thought and ideas. Almost all of the great classics have been the books which said something new, or said something differently, ahead of or not in step with the custom and traditions of the community. This is the standard which fires a Whitman from his job and forces a Galileo to recant.

If we are agreed that the standards employed as touchstones by the librarians are essentially the same as those used by the censor, the distinction between selection and censorship will have to be found in the way the standards are applied. The honorable surgeon and the sadist both wield a knife, but in the framework in which they perform their operations and the premises on which they base their actions lies the key to the distinction between them. The atmosphere in which the decision is reached to reject a book tells us more than the mere fact of rejection, the high-minded excuses the rejector makes public to justify it, or the standards against which he allegedly weighs his decision.

Negative or Positive?

The major characteristic which makes for the all-important difference seems to me to be this: that the selector's approach is positive, while that of the censor is negative. This is more than a verbal quibble; it transforms the entire act and the steps included in it. For to the selector, the important thing is to find reasons to keep the book. Given such a guiding principle, the selector looks for values, for strengths, for virtues which will overshadow minor objections. For the censor, on the other hand, the important thing is to find reasons to reject the book; his guiding principle leads him to seek out the objectionable features, the weaknesses, the possibilities for misinterpretation. The positive selector asks what the reaction of a rational intelligent adult would be to the content of the work; the censor fears for the results on the weak, the warped, and the irrational. The selector says, if there is anything good in this book let us try to keep it; the censor says, if there is anything bad in this book, let us reject it. And since there is seldom a flawless work in any form, the censor's approach can destroy much that is worth saving.

An inevitable consequence of the negative approach is that it leads to the use of isolated parts rather than the complete whole upon which to base a judgment. Taken out of context and given a weight completely out of keeping with their place in the over-all work, single words and unrelated passages can be used to damn a book. This technique has been typical of many of the most notorious instances of censorship: the major theme, the total purpose, the effect of the work as a unified whole have been ignored in order to focus on a word or phrase, or sequence. In

other words, four letters have outweighed five hundred pages.

Nor is this failure to view the relevancy of the parts to the whole an outmoded one; it was in 19—not 18—53 that an official censor went on record publicly to the effect that he does not distinguish between a nude in a work of art and one in any other context: "It's all"—and I quote—"lustful to me." The censor who starts with such a premise will inevitably find much that is offensive, because that is what he is seeking and because he is abnormally susceptible. The phenomenon is not a new one, nor is the suspicion which logically follows: whether a mind so oriented does not bring more dirt to the book than was originally there.

The negative orientation, which seeks reasons to ban rather than to preserve, also leads to the judgment of books by external rather than internal criteria. The censor need not ask what the book has to say, what values it has to contribute, what—within the covers of the book itself—is the material which will be lost if the book is suppressed. He can ask, instead, what kind of a husband and father is the author; of what nation is he a citizen; what are his political affiliations; what magazines does he read; what is his color, his race, his religion? And if present circumstances cannot lead to a rationalization for the ban, he can go into the past—what has the writer ever done with which I am in disagreement? The book is not judged on its merits as a book at all; it is used as a stick to beat its author for personal deviations whether they are reflected in the book or not.

Internal Valuer

The selector, on the other hand, judges by internal values. Since it is the book with which he is concerned, it is the content of the book that is weighed, not the table manners of the publisher or the sartorial orthodoxy of the author. By extension, then, the librarian, if he is truly a selector and not a censor, does not succumb to irrelevancies—introduced either by the prejudices of his own background or the pressures of his library's patrons. He admits the right of the reader to take issue with the writer, but he is swayed by arguments only where they have relevance to the book itself, and to the book as a whole.

It is important to note here that, whether they annoy us or not, some pressures are legitimate and our patrons have every right to exert them, so long as they are pressures

on opinion, nor on *the* expression of opinion. So long as the opposing point of view may be expressed, the reader has a right to reject it, to take issue with it, and to try to convince others of its falsity. Unfortunately, the methods taken to convince others often introduce elements which limit by intimidation the freedom to arrive at an honest judgment on the merits of the case alone—as when the police authorities threaten to find fire hazards in a theater which shows a film to which they are opposed. Strictly speaking the police have not censored—they have merely expressed their opinion of the film in question, and it is the theater owner who refuses to show the film. But the values in the film have not been the basis of his decision; irrelevant pressures have been exerted, and it is the use of such irrelevant pressures that has given a bad name to all pressures and has led many advocates of free speech to seek retaliatory limitations on the freedom of special interest groups.

Irrelevant Threat

Fortunately in most library situations, the implied and irrelevant threat is seldom used to dictate selection policy. But many librarians have been known to defer to anticipated pressures, and to avoid faring issues by suppressing possible issue-making causes. In such cases, the rejection of a book *is* censorship, for the book has been judged—not on its own merits—but in terms of the librarian's devotion to three square meals a day. Do not misunderstand me—I am as devoted as any to the delights of the table and a roof against the rain. But these considerations should not be mistaken for literary criteria, and it is with the latter that the librarian-as-selector is properly concerned.

Finally, the selector begins, ideally, with a presumption in favor of liberty of thought; the censor does not. The aim of the selector is to promote reading, not to inhibit it; to multiply the points of view which will find expression, not limit them; to be a channel for communication, not a bar against it. In a sense, perhaps, it could be said that the librarian is interfering with the freedom to read whenever he fails to make some book available. But viewed realistically, the librarian is promoting the freedom to read by making as accessible as possible as many things as he can, and his selection is more likely to

be in the direction of stimulating controversy and introducing innovation than in suppressing the new and perpetuating the stereotype. That is why he so often selects works which shock some people. The books which have something new to say are most likely to shock and consequently may not readily find another outlet through which to say it. The frequent forays of the censors against the libraries is heartening evidence that selection and censorship *are* different things.

Liberty or Control?

Selection, then, begins with a presumption in favor of liberty of thought; censorship, with a presumption in favor of thought control. Selection's approach to the book is positive, seeking its values in the book as a book, and in the book as a whole. Censorship's approach is negative, seeking for vulnerable characteristics wherever they can be found—anywhere within the book, or even outside it. Selection seeks to protect the right of the reader to read; censorship seeks to protect—not the right—but the reader himself from the fancied effects of his reading. The selector has faith in the intelligence of the reader; the censor has faith only in his own.

In other words, selection is democratic while censorship is authoritarian, and in our democracy we have traditionally tended to put our trust in the selector rather than in the censor. We treasure our freedom and we trust those who demonstrate a similar desire to protect it, although we are sometimes deluded for a time by those who only profess a devotion to our liberties. While we are willing to defer to the honest judgment of those in special fields whose knowledge, training, and special aptitude fit them to render these judgments, we demand that those to whom we delegate such authority shall demonstrate the virtues which are the basis of that trust. In the last analysis, this is what makes a profession: the earned confidence of those it serves. But that confidence *must* be earned, and it can be only if we remain true to the ideals for which our profession stands. In the profession of librarianship, these ideals are embodied, in part at least, in the special characteristics which distinguish selection from censorship. If we are to gain the esteem we seek for our profession, we must be willing to accept the difficult obligations which those ideals imply.